



Fair manager abruptly resigns

By KIM BRIGGEMAN of the Missoulian

Mere weeks before the Western Montana Fair is set to begin, its manager has abruptly resigned.

Scot Meader declined Tuesday to discuss his reasons for stepping down after 4 1/2 years, but said he will stay on the job through the six-day fair, which starts Aug. 7.

"I'm not going to leave the county or the Missoula folks in the lurch," he said. "I'm going to give them 110 percent."

Steve Johnson, personnel director for Missoula County, met Tuesday with Meader's attorney, Matt Thiel, and hammered out the terms of Meader's departure. Johnson presented the agreement to the fair commission in its executive session later in the day.

Johnson said the agreement calls for the resignation to go into effect Sept. 7. Meader will receive severance pay of one year's salary, or roughly \$60,000.

"I do need to stress it's a voluntary thing on his part to resign his position," Johnson said. "It wasn't something he was forced to do, or anything like that."

Meader took over as fair manager in late 2002, replacing Karen Bonomo, who quit after 14 months.

Bonomo's predecessor was Sam Yewusiak, who managed the fair for more than 22 years, from 1979 to 2001. Either Katy Jourdonnais or her husband, Les, were in charge for the 22 years before that.

Buck Smith, chairman of the fair commission, said he suspects the board will wait until the fair is over before launching a search for Meader's successor.

"This is a hard time of year to recruit fair managers," he said.

Word of Meader's departure came on the eve of an important early step in the implementation of the fair commission's strategic plan to reinvigorate the Western Montana Fair. Architects will reveal three conceptual design options for a new fairgrounds to the county commission on Wednesday morning.

It'll be the first public viewing of the plans, which will be presented for public input next Tuesday and at the fair in August. The county intends to place an \$8 million bond issue on the ballot in November 2008.

Meader was unhappy in June when the seven-member fair board approved wording for a new contract, though he was midway through his current three-year pact.

Michelle Felde, one of two new commissioners who joined the board when it was expanded from five to seven members late last year, said she was directed to devise a more flexible pact as the critical years of the strategic plan approached.

Meader said he gave Felde input for a new contract, but did not feel he had a chance to negotiate before the wording was approved. The revised contract did not tie the board to a three-year "rollover" contract with him.

"She wants me to sign a contract to go from a three-year contract to a one-year contract, and all the terms that are in there that we haven't even negotiated yet," Meader said after the June 19 meeting. "Why would I do that?"

He also locked horns with longtime carnival operator Reed Williams after Meader scheduled events on the weekends before and after the Mayfair Fling, in which Williams has a large stake. Williams said he is trying to make the Mayfair a signature event on the fairgrounds' calendar as the strategic plan proceeds.

Meader said he's under pressure to make the present fairgrounds pay for themselves, and said he can't do that if Williams' company, Royal West Amusements, locks up so many dates in the spring and summer.

But no one was talking Tuesday about why Meader was leaving.

Meader said Thiel would provide answers, but the Missoula attorney could not be reached for comment.

"I really don't know his reasons," Smith told the Missoulian. "A lot of your questions I don't know, and a lot of them come down to legalities."

"We're just going to go forward and put on the best fair we can and encourage the public to review our plans for the future of the fairgrounds, and start a search for a new fair manager," the chairman added.

Meader, who grew up in Billings, served a 10-year stint with the U.S. Coast Guard before moving back to Montana when he and his wife, Joy, had their first child. He managed the Central Montana Fair in Lewistown for a couple of years before moving to Missoula.

Meader said he doesn't have another job lined up. His wife is medical records coordinator for a health care business.

“I really enjoyed working with everybody here, and the community's great. We plan on staying,” he said. “We have our house and the kids are established in school. Joy's got her job and everybody's just been fantastic. I've really appreciated working for Missoula County.”

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